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ABSTRACT

Thirty parents, 8 males and 22 females, whose children were enrolled in kindergarten, participated in this study, designed to elicit parents' nonverbal expression of feeling toward their children. Two faceless, 30-inch unisex dolls were designed to represent the child. Depending on the situation, the dolls were dressed as either male or female or as black or white. Parents, after completing the Jourards's Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (SDQ), were asked to demonstrate nonverbally how the situation made him/her feel toward the child (i.e. the doll), and to indicate nonverbally specific feeling evoked by that situation. Using the Nonverbal Emotional Response Test (NERT), designed for this study, parents' nonverbal responses to the stimulus situations were recorded and scored. Results indicated a positive relationship between the amount of information disclosed on the SDQ by parents and their expression of nonverbal feeling. As an implication of this study, the suggestion is made that as spouses reveal their inner thoughts and values more openly to each other they will in turn provide a similar, open relationship between themselves and their children. (Author/MP)

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MEASURING NONVERBAL EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS IN PARENT-CHILD INTERACTIONS: A DILEMMA AND A SOLUTION

by

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ABSTRACT

Striking differences exist between parents in the ways that they express their emotional feelings toward their children. Some express a lot of love and affection; in contrast, other parents exhibit hostility and rejection. Such diverse behaviors cause one to ask "Can emotional feelings be identified?"

The parent-child interaction presents a real concern for counselors as well as other helping professionals. Since many parents are unable to verbalize their real feelings toward their children, this study was designed as a viable means for eliciting nonverbal expression of feelings of parents toward their children.

The participants were 30 parents whose children were enrolled in kindergarten. Two 30-inch unisex dolls were designed to represent the child. Depending on the situation, they were dressed as either male or female or Black or white. Using the Nonverbal Emotional Response Test designed for this study, the parents nonverbal responses to stimulus situations were recorded and scored.

The results indicate that emotional feelings expressed by parents toward their children can be elicited by stimulus

and measured. Additionally a positive relationship seems to exist between the amount of information disclosed and the expression of nonverbal feelings.

Jourard (1954, 1958) reported that there is an appropriate degree of self-disclosure whereby either extreme of too little or too much can create adjustment problems. Difficulties in disclosing appropriately caused Jourard to conclude that the ideal would be to disclose much to significant others and a moderate to small amount to all others.

There are a number of nonverbal factors that determine the degree of self-disclosure. The importance of such nonverbal behaviors as tone of voice, body movements, and facial expressions in revealing meaningful information about the individual have been cited (Ekman and Friesen, 1969; Harrison, 1974; Knapp, 1972).

Although parents have various means for revealing themselves to their children, a large portion of their messages are revealed through nonverbal cues. Much of that which is transmitted involves the emotions that they express toward their children. Just as parents have different beliefs about child rearing, striking differences exist in ways they express their emotions toward their children (Jourard, 1968; Kaplan, 1965). Some parents for example,

express a lot of love and affection. In contrast there are others who exhibit hostility and rejection. Such diverse emotional behaviors cause one to ask: How can emotions be identified? Can they be measured?

Insight into various aspects of emotions have been reported (Jones, 1935, 1959; Mehrabian, 1969; Schacter, 1964; Sherman, 1927; Watson, 1924). While ten fundamental emotions have been defined (Ekman and Friesen, 1969; Ellsworth, 1972; Izard, 1977), this study concentrated on the three emotions of shame, anger and love.

The emotion anger is caused by physical and psychological barriers that interrupt something that one enjoys. The perception may be physical, personal, or social (Boller and Charles, 1968). Shame, on the other hand, is the internal reaction felt when an individual realizes that he/she has "done soemthing wrong" and usually the behavior has been discriminately associated with punishment (Aronfreed, 1968). The third emotion, love, is difficult to define. Rubin (1973) identified love in the mainstreams of social-psychological approaches as an attitude held by a person toward a particular other person involving predispositions to think, feel, and behave in certain ways toward that other person.

A variety of approaches for identifying and measuring emotions have been suggested (Ekman and Friesen, 1969; Mehrabian, 1968; Woodworth, 1938). These writers have clearly supported the belief that much behavior is non-verbal and is directly dependent upon the emotions of the individual. This suggests there could be a relationship between self-disclosure and the expression of nonverbal feelings.

This paper outlines a method for measuring the non-verbal expression of feelings of parents toward their children. Because of its extensive use in measuring self-disclosure, Jourard's Self-Disclosure Questionnaire was selected as the measurement tool (Jourard, 1958). A second measurement tool, the Nonverbal Emotional Response Test (NERT), was designed to describe parental feelings in response to a specific evoked emotional situation.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 30 parent volunteers whose children were enrolled in four kindergartens. The parent sample consisted of eight males and 22 females. The child sample was composed of 16 females and 14 males (seven were non-white).

Procedure

Parents were asked to complete Jourard's Self-Disclosure Questionnaire. Then the parents were given the NERT which was designed for this study to elicit parental feelings exhibited toward their children in evoked emotional response situations.

The testing procedure required two 30-inch dolls that were unisex. Depending on the situation, the dolls were dressed as either male or female or Black or white. Since the parent was told to imagine that the doll was his/her own child, the doll was faceless.

Insert Picture(s) of Doll(s) About Here

It is very important to arrange the seating to allow the examiner and parent to be seated at right angles to each other. Two additional chairs, one for the doll and another for the parent, should be placed at least five feet from the examiner and the parent. It is very important that the counselor be able to see the face and actions of the parent as he/she responds to the doll. If this procedure is not followed, it is impossible to score the test.

The Nonverbal Emotional Response Test (NERT) consisted of four parts: one pre-test item and three test items. The parent was then asked to demonstrate nonverbally how the situation made him/her feel toward the child which in this instance was the doll in the chair (caution: the parent

may not use words). Next the parent was asked to indicate a specific feeling evoked by that situation and his/her responses were recorded. The following is an example of one of the test situations:

> _____(child) asks you to play a game with him/her and you tell him/her that you're too busy. _____ (child) plays alone quietly and you change your mind about the game. You get his/her favorite game and go to him/her and say "Let's play!" He/she looks up to you and says, "Mommy/Daddy, I love you."
>
> Show _____ (child) how you feel.

The nonverbal response was recorded on an answer sheet. Approximately sixty seconds was allowed for the response.

Scoring

The score sheets for each test situation were designed to show the following three types of scores:

1. Face and body response of adult.
2. Areas touched on the doll.
3. Verbal statement of feeling.

It is important to look at the parent's face immediately following the statement "show _____ how you feel" and especially notice the three facial regions of brows, eyes, and mouth. Any changes were recorded by checking the corresponding region on the score sheet. The body response involved gross body movements that directly related to the doll such as going to the doll, sitting by the doll or touching, holding or embracing the doll. The scoring system gave numerical values for the various test components.

Results

The total Nonverbal Emotional Response Test score was obtained by summing the individual subtests for anger, shame, and love. The Self-Disclosure Questionnaire total was obtained as the sum of the scores of the responses of the five target persons. The scores for each subtest and the total Nonverbal Emotional Response were correlated with each target-person and in turn the total Self-Disclosure score (see Table 1). Significant correlations were obtained between spouse and next total, SDQ total and shame, SDQ total and shame and Total SDQ and total NERT.

Insert Table 1 About Here

The Nonverbal Emotional Response test data were compared by examination of the means of each subtest and the total score. There were no significant differences on any portion of the test with regard to sex and no significant differences were obtained across kindergartens. Means for the total sample are summarized in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 About Here

The Self-Disclosure Questionnaire total mean fell within 10 points of the means for white males and females as reported by Jourard in his initial research (Jourard, 1958). Differences in the means of this sample and Jourard's sample were observed

in the male and female totals. Jourard reported females as disclosing more than males by 45 points. In this sample, the score for males was 8.6 points higher than the score for females, whereas the means for target persons was closer to Jourard's sample of married persons. Self-disclosure to spouse was greatest for both samples.

Discussion

The results of this study help us to answer our original question positively. That is emotional feelings expressed by parents toward their children can be measured. While the results reverse the trend reported by Jourard in 1958 when he found females disclosing more than males, one needs to remember that this study was conducted 22 years later. One can further speculate that the contemporary man is more "open" and more "willing" to disclose his emotions to others. Additionally, one can further suggest that changes in parenting (father assuming more active role, single parenting) have had an influence on the relationship between the father and child.

The significant correlation between the Self-Disclosure Questionnaire total allows one to conclude that there is a positive relationship between the amount of information disclosed and the expression of nonverbal feelings. Furthermore, the significant correlation between spouse and the total NERT allows one to conclude that as spouses reveal their inner

thoughts and values more openly to each other they in turn provide a similar, open relationship between themselves and their children. Jourard (1958) concluded that there is an appropriate range of self-disclosure. This suggests that an appropriate range may exist in the present study in the amount of feelings that parents expressed toward their children. Additionally the results suggest that the NERT results can help parents assess the appropriateness of these messages toward their children.

Recommendations

Counselors are often confronted with communication problems between the parent and child at all age levels (elementary, secondary, post-secondary). On many occasions, parents are unable to discuss their "real" feelings toward their children. This approach presents a viable means for eliciting nonverbal expression of feelings. As the counselor observes the parental responses, more information can be obtained about the interactions in the home.

This approach is not envisioned as one limited to the parent-child interaction. It is also recommended for eliciting the feelings of siblings toward each other. Similarly, it would be helpful in pinpointing the happenings in peer interactions. Additionally, it is felt the approach would be useful in group as well as individual counseling sessions.

While the study has direct application for the school counselor, this approach is a viable one for both teachers and administrators. Likewise, it would be useful to the marriage-family counselor or counselor in private practice.

Jourard (1958) reported that females disclosed more than males. Since Jourard's findings are in direct contrast to the findings of this study, which was conducted 22 years later, it is suggested that further study be directed to ascertain if the self-disclosing trend continues by sex. Additionally, since Jourard's study revealed an appropriate degree of self-disclosure exists, it is suggested that future studies might direct themselves to help parents assess the appropriateness of their messages toward their children.

TABLE 1

Correlation between Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (SDQ) and the Nonverbal Emotional Response Test (NERT)

SDQ	r	NERT
Spouse	.38*	Total
Total	.40*	Shame
Total	.27	Anger
Total	.06	Love
Total	.38	Total

*$p < .05$

TABLE 2

Comparison of Means of Total NERT by Subtest and Total Score with Sex

NERT	Total (n=29)	Male (n=8)	Female (n=21
Anger	5.74	5.75	5.71
Shame	6.89	6.75	6.90
Love	12.59	13.12	12.53
Total	25.22	25.62	25.14

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